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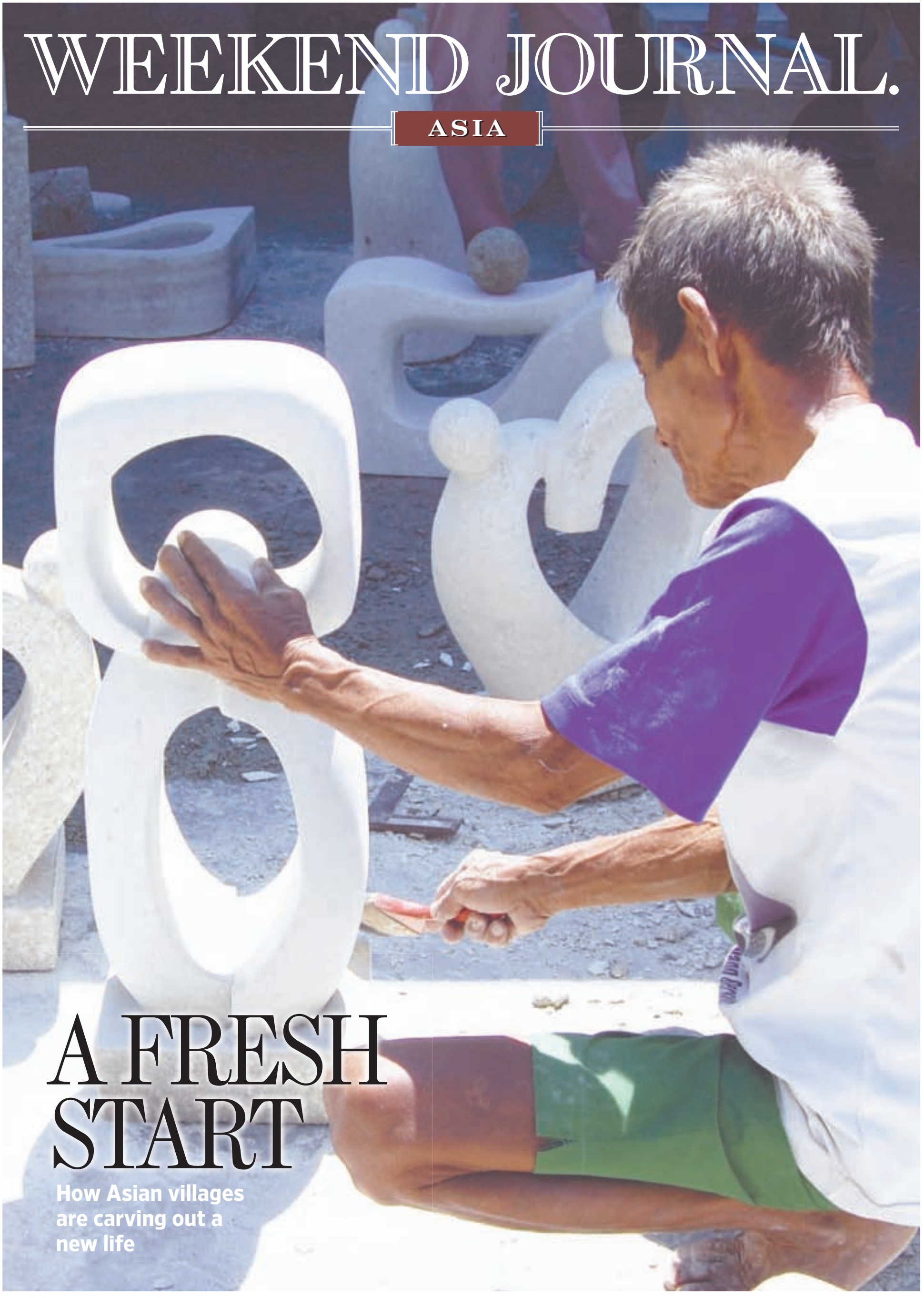

A FRESH START

How Asian villages are carving out a new life

CONTENTS

W3 | Wine

What's under the hammer

W4 | Culture

The fearful decade ahead

W6 | Fashion

Catalog retailers get stylish

W7 | Fashion

'It' boots for the season

Cover: A villager in Nawung, Indonesia, finishes a stone carving (ASB Indonesia)
This page (left to right): Updated L.L. Bean products (L.L. Bean); Tourists in Chi Phat, Cambodia, on a guided tour (Wildlife Alliance); a Nestlé shopping bag with Milo advertisement (National Museum of Singapore)

W8 | Cover story

SOCIETY

A fresh start

Asian villages carve out a new life

W13 | Film

'Avatar' and 'Invictus'; Arbitrage price check

W14 | Taste

An epic battle in epic paint

W15 | Time Off

Astrology meets art in Bangkok; Big puppets in Hong Kong; Shopping bags in Singapore; Festival in Sydney; Warhol in Seoul; Midcentury China photos in Macau

WEEKEND JOURNAL
ASIA

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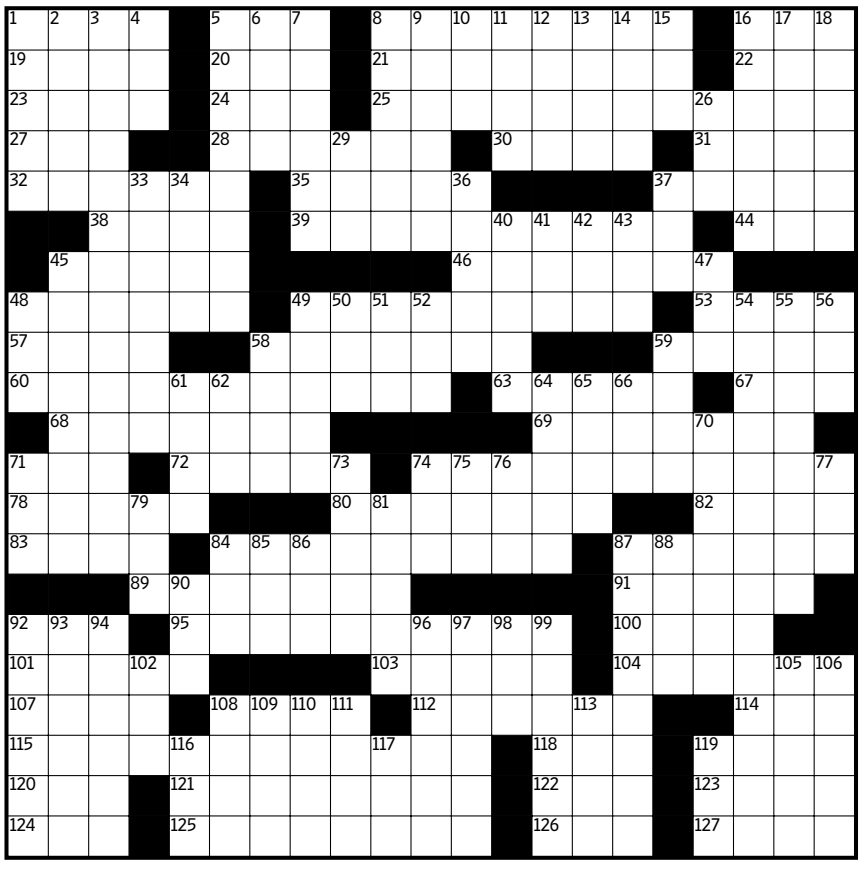
A publication of
THE WALL STREET JOURNAL ASIA.

THE JOURNAL CROSSWORD / Edited by Mike Shenk

Potluck Dinner / by Randolph Ross



Across

1 Cricket equipment
5 New Deal agcy.
8 It's lost in a classic poem
16 Enthusiasm
19 Morning man on the radio
20 Vault part
21 Exasperated cry
22 Layer of dark green eggs
23 Vanished
24 Marv Albert's signature basketball call
25 What the admiral brought to the potluck dinner?
27 Screwdriver part
28 Star of Stone's "W."
30 Acrimony
31 Show unwillingness
32 One-time
35 Very funny folks
37 Enthusiastically determined
38 Two-time player of Elizabeth
39 What the podiatrist brought to the potluck dinner?
44 Kenny G's instrument
45 Pelvis connectors
46 Congress has the largest one
48 Kidded around
49 What the goldsmith brought to the potluck dinner?
53 "Take ___" (1994 Madonna hit)
57 ___ facto
58 "Brand New Key" singer
59 The Beach Boys suggested catching one
60 What the entomologist brought to the potluck dinner?
63 Took back
67 Secure
68 Hotel giveaway
69 Hero worshiper
71 One from Madrid
72 Rapper's entourage
74 What the repo man brought to the potluck dinner?
78 Canvasses
80 Felix, for one
82 Key, e.g.
83 "Uh-huh"
84 What the mathematician brought to the potluck dinner?
87 Catalan cellist
89 Is amused by
91 Actors Ken and Lena
92 Minnesota governor Pawlenty
95 What the British Open winner brought to the potluck dinner?
100 Made like
101 "Gotta go!"
103 Hammerin' Hank
104 Maurice's "Gigi" co-star
107 Up to the job
108 ___ bit (somewhat)
112 Dyes
114 "...man ___ mouse"
115 What the duck hunter brought to the potluck dinner?
118 Feel bad
119 Serves well
120 Burrows on Broadway
121 It has its charms
122 LIRR operator
123 Fashionable Big Apple label
124 McCain is one: Abbr.
125 Place for the cautious
126 McCain was one: Abbr.
127 Drifting

Down

1 Unlikely but necessary condition
2 1998 BP acquisition
3 What the piano repairman brought to the potluck dinner?
4 Toronto-to-D.C. heading
5 What the satirist brought to the potluck dinner?
6 Berth place
7 Learn
8 Rack's mate
9 1972 Billy Wilder film
10 Accelerate, briefly
11 Captain of the Pequod
12 Mustachioed artist
13 Fan club focus
14 Regal address
15 Capt.'s guess
16 They're unlikely to bring home the bacon
17 Ferdinand's wife
18 Arctic grazer
26 Jazz group: Abbr.
29 Lucy of "Kill Bill"
33 Speed of sound
34 French I verb
36 He led the Chicago Symphony and the London Philharmonic
37 EMT skill
40 Better, weatherwise
41 Org. for mom-and-pop stores
42 TV planet
43 Its cap. is Abu Dhabi
45 Tony's TV family
47 A plane's rudder controls it
48 Peter Pan rival
49 Some seaweeds
50 Boxing biopic
51 Explorer of Canada's coast
52 T or F, often
54 What the hair stylist brought to the potluck dinner?
55 Garb for Mario or Luigi
56 Freshly painted
58 Curators' degs.
59 Curry and Coulter
61 Salary ceilings
62 Coverage gp.
64 Popeye creator Segar
65 Pay period, often
66 Galley item
70 Components of some chains
71 Wire service initials
73 China's Zhou___
74 Froot Loops toucan
75 WWII sphere
76 Notre Dame U. home
77 ___ Moines
79 Journey part
81 ___ hole into (corrodes)
84 Campaign souvenir
85 Amsterdam-based financial co.
86 Handy communication skill, for short
87 What the miner brought to the potluck dinner?
88 Mont Blanc, par exemple
90 One making calls
92 Pageant toppers
93 Bend one's elbow
94 Like magma
96 Misanthropy
97 Mournful
98 Very long time
99 Put up tents
102 Tasseled topper
105 "The woman," to Sherlock
106 Class with low standards
108 Special something
109 Brit. support group during WWII
110 McCartney album "___ Cor Meum"
111 Squeezes (out)
113 One of the Jackson 5
116 The Mannings, briefly
117 One of the Mannings
119 Oklahoma city

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Dec. 18 solution

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All bottled up

Wine auctions are defying the economic downturn

By Raymond Sokolov

New York

At 10:30 on a recent weekday morning, bidders gathered for a commodities auction. This was no trading pit full of shouting traders. The venue was Restaurant Daniel, the top-rated French dining spot in midtown Manhattan. The commodity was wine. And as has been customary in the past, the auctioneer, Zachys, provided a croissant breakfast and Daniel prepared a $65 lunch for customers bidding on lots of very fine old wines, many selling for thousands of dollars a case. Better still, the market was up.

Zachys's assistant auction director, Julia Gilbert, told me that the 2009 holiday auction brought in $4,059,180, a year-on-year increase of 8%. This upward move duplicated a similarly rosé picture in the overall wine auction market as reported by the London International Vintners Exchange, or Liv-ex. The Liv-ex 100 Fine Wine Index, an industry index based on 100 major wines, ended November 2009 12.2% ahead of November 2008.

At the Zachys auction, the richest of 1,551 lots contained six magnums of a great 1971 Burgundy from Richebourg, Domaine de la Romanée Conti, sold at $60,000.

I was way out of my league here, but at home later I did jump into the frenzy with a $10 opening bid on a lot of 1988 Château Mouton Rothschild, the Bordeaux first growth, listed with several other respectable bottles on German eBay. While I waited for the online miniauction to play itself out, I had time to investigate whether wine auctions now—or ever—were a sensible place to risk money, and if the rise and fall of bids for rare bottles of red burgundy and classy German late-harvest whites could be a useful indicator of where the financial markets in general were heading.

Unlike normal commodity markets, wine auctions serve traders who overwhelmingly intend to take delivery of the lots they buy. Indeed, the naive observer might assume that someone ponying up a premium price for a perishable consumable would, in fact, consume it. But this is manifestly not always the case. Many big-ticket lots are treated by their owners like pure investment vehicles, as untouchable as gold ingots (which could, after all, be melted down by an investor who suddenly got a yen to give someone a pair of earrings forged from his private gold stock). Great wine is said to improve with age, but after a certain point it gets too venerable to uncork, even though many wine collectors and investors believe fine old vintages will always increase or maintain their drinkability, despite the risk of often invisible deterioration inside the bottle.

The successful bidder on an imperial (six-liter) bottle of 1982 Château Petrus at the Zachys holiday auction could by now have guzzled his way through his $36,000 investment in ethereal red (with help from friends, one hopes). But I am willing to give better than even odds that his new accession is carefully stored in a climate-controlled cellar awaiting a further rise in the wine market.

Over time, old wine, like almost everything else in limited or diminishing supply in the world, has increased in value—but, like almost everything else in the world, wine auction prices also took a big hit in the autumn of 2008 and the winter of 2009. Even so, the wine market never fell as far, percentage-wise, as the stock market, when measured month-by-month against the Dow.

The Liv-ex wine index was at a near-record 258.41 in May 2008. For the next few months it stayed at roughly the same level, until it dropped sharply to 213.94 in October, a 15% fall from September. The same month, the Dow dropped 14%. The Dow continued to drop precipitously through February 2009, but the Liv-ex's losses began to level off. During the bleakest monthly close of last winter, stocks were down 44% from their May 2008 levels, but wine never fell farther than 21%. By November 2009, the Dow had climbed back to 10344.84, still down 18% from where it had been in May 2008. The Liv-ex was down 9% over that same period.

But wineholders aren't all smiling. Those who had a case of the top-ranked Burgundy red La Tâche from the unspectacular year of 2004 in their cellars in May 2008 had a paper loss of 24% by this past November, a drop of $3,633 in the best list price for the wine. Of course, they could always drink their losses, but just a single bottle of 2004 La Tâche at the best list price listed on Liv-ex would amount to a $984 self-indulgence for which, at the May '08 price, that half-hour of immersion in the Pinot Noir sublime had really cost them $1,287.

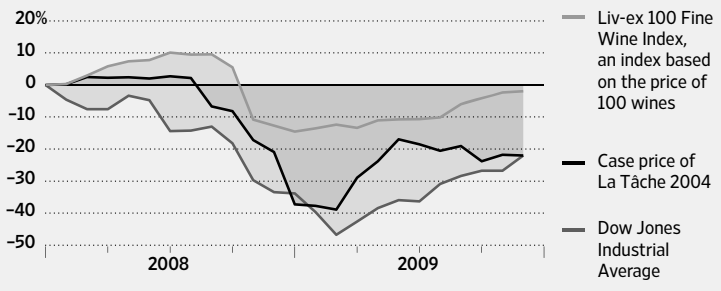
People who sat on their stash of the top Bordeaux label, Château Lafite Rothschild, did a lot better. A case of the 2004 reached $6,148 in November, 5% above its May '08 price ($5,839), after a palate-shrinking drop to $2,958 in December '08.

As for my foray into the weeds of the wine-auction market on German eBay, I was the winning bidder, at $22, on the bottle of Mouton. It might sound like a good price—Zachys sold 1988 Mouton last fall for $290 a bottle—but the bottle I was bidding on was empty.

A December auction at Zachys in New York included an imperial (six liters) of 1982 Château Cheval Blanc for $13,200, a jeroboam (five liters) of 1982 Château Latour for $10,800 and an imperial of 1982 Château Petrus for $36,000.

Zachy's Wine Auctions

Case Study | Performance since December 2007



Note: Through November (latest available wine data)

Sources: WSJ Market Data Group; Liv-ex

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Illustration by Ray Bartkus

Worrying time

We forecast the unfounded fears of the future

By Nick Gillespie

Few decades have been as resolutely and relentlessly dismal as this past one, which is thankfully all over but the shouting (a note to calendaric purists who insist that the decade really runs from 2001 through 2010: You're part of the problem).

Contested elections, international terrorism, more bubbles blown (and burst!) than on a Lawrence Welk TV special. Did we really survive the Y2K bug, avian flu and the unstoppable proliferation of saggy pants for this? There was plenty serious that went wrong with "the Aughts" (one more indicator of a desultory decade: the period has produced no commonly shared nickname). For the U.S., it was one of the worst decades ever for stocks, the country mired itself in two seemingly endless and intractable wars, total federal spending increased by more than 100% in real dollars, unemployment hit double digits and for the second time in 10 years, the government is poised to massively intervene in health care (and not just Medicare this time). Most troubling for long-term economic growth, and hence living standards, it is no longer clear where the public sector ends and the private sector begins. It's hard to escape the sinking feeling that the government-controlled General Motors may well be prototyping America's answer to the Lada.

Yet for all that trouble, Americans spent a lot of time and energy in the Aughts fighting phantom menaces, such as the ideas that vaccines cause autism in children, that cash machines featuring a Spanish-language option posed a threat to national sovereignty and that rampant steroid use by players was turning off fans who attended Major League Baseball in record numbers. All of these oh-so-pressing issues received multiple congressional hearings when they should have been more properly rinsed away, like the hand-sanitizer gels that rose to ubiquity.

As a sadly appropriate parting gift to this grim first decade of the 21st century, a period so debased that baseball's Boston Red Sox—who had last finished on top in 1918—managed to win not just one but two World Series championships, we can thank Nigerian would-be suicide bomber Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab for robbing us of our inalienable right to use a cramped bathroom at 9,000 meters. Indeed, we can only await Secretary of Homeland Security Janet Napolitano's directive that all frequent fliers must now go commando as a condition of air travel.

While Mr. Abdulmutallab's underwear bomb thankfully did not explode en route from Amsterdam to Detroit, his botched attempt (and the heroic acts of passengers) has reignited one of the decade's most pervasive—and overblown—anxieties: that terrorist violence would become "the new normal," an everyday occurrence in the U.S.

As Ohio State University political scientist John Mueller has documented, such fears are

as erroneous as they are deeply held. "The likelihood that a person living outside a war zone will perish at the hands of an international terrorist over an 80-year period is about one in 80,000," wrote Mr. Mueller in the magazine American Interest in 2008. "By comparison, an American's chance of dying in an auto accident over the same time interval is one in eighty." Well, rational analysis should never get in the way of strong feelings.

What will be the great hysterical fears of the coming decade? By definition, such worries need to be simultaneously undocumentable and just plausible enough to convince politicians, celebrities, civic do-gooders, captains of industry and media types that America's very society hangs in the balance. For a classic example, think back to the 1980s, when Tipper Gore, the wife of then-Sen. Al Gore, helped form the Parents Music Resource Center and addressed the Senate Committee on Commerce, Science and Transportation regarding the pressing topic of sexual, violent and occult imagery in pop music. As Mrs. Gore wrote in her best-selling (and now hard-to-find) 1987 book "Raising PG Kids in an X-Rated Society," "By using satanic symbols on the concert stage, and album covers, such as those used by Ozzy Osbourne... certain heavy metal bands lure teenagers into what one expert has called 'the cult of the '80s.' Many kids experiment with the deadly satanic game, and get hooked." It is probably only thanks to the intervention of the Gores that the U.S. managed as a country to wrestle free both of Beelzebub's and Ronnie James Dio's bony grasp. Which, it's worth adding, might have been preferable to that of Ben Bernanke and Timothy Geithner.

Here's a tour of America's probable panics of the 2010s, some of which are already well under way.

China is both making and eating our lunch

Few things engender flop sweat faster among upper-class Americans than the idea that another nation is on the fast track to economic domination. In the late 1980s, it was self-evident to those in the know that Japan's government-subsidized, super-hierarchical and tightly integrated mega-corporations were intrinsically superior to their American counterparts. A raft of best sellers like "Rising Sun" and movies such as "Gung Ho!" bid sayonara to the American Way. The fear collapsed in the '90s along with the Japanese economy, which has yet to pull out of a "lost decade" that's lasted nearly 20 years.

Look for a repeat of the same story, this time with China in the lead role. By keeping their currency low—they have pegged it to the dollar, after all—the Chinese have thrown "hundreds of thousands and maybe even more Americans...out of work," says Charles Schumer, a U.S. senator who has called for a trade war. After a couple more quarters of weak or nonexistent growth, get ready for calls to banish dissent and individualism in business that will last right up to the moment that the Chinese government makes the wrong call. Which, if history is any guide, is already in the pipeline.

Peak oil refuses to rise to the occasion

You don't have to be a global-warming alarmist to wonder just when the world's oil reserves are finally going to dry up and drive the price of oil through the roof, thereby ushering in a glorious age of energy created by hamsters on exercise wheels or some other renewable source. Conservatives who are into energy independence (such as Sarah Palin, the former Alaskan governor) are also rooting for "peak oil," the moment at which oil reserves go into irreversible decline, as it means that increasing domestic production will become politically possible. The funny thing is, peak oil has been predicted with regularity for decades now, and something always gets in the way: New reserves are discovered, prices collapse due to economic slowdowns, new technologies extract more fuel from less supply. Look for a new peak-oil panic the moment the world economy unambiguously recovers and demand rises. And after gas prices climb up to $4 a gallon before dropping again to $2.50.

Things that go bump in the night

Some fears that have captured the imagination over the years

Witchcraft: One notable wave of witchcraft paranoia hit Salem, Massachusetts, in the 1690s, with accusations against more than 200 people.

Drinking: Proponents of Prohibition in the U.S. argued that alcohol was linked to moral and social ills. The movement died down as the ban, which took effect in 1920, led to new problems.

2012: Some believe that the Mayan calendar predicts a catastrophic event on Dec. 21, 2012. The prophecy has already spawned several books and a big-budget movie.

Elvis: In the 1950s, many parents worried that Elvis Presley's swaying hips would corrupt America's youth. In one famous TV appearance, he was shown only from the waist up.

Comets: These outer-space snowballs were objects of fear in many ancient cultures, including Rome and Babylon. They have been seen as signs of impending disaster, war and death, and legend has it that Pope Calixtus III excommunicated Halley's Comet in 1456.

Art Resource, NY (Mayan); Getty Images (4)

Everything that can be invented has been invented

A new Zogby poll reports that about one-third of Americans "believed there would be greater technological advances by 2010." Who isn't disappointed by the lack of jetpacks and doggie treadmills like on the 1960s cartoon "The Jetsons"? The iPhone came out like three years ago and there hasn't been anything else invented since then, right?

When Americans aren't complaining that the rate of innovation is so fast that it's causing future shock, we like to complain that it's been years since anything radically new has rocked our world. Sure, the Clapper—allowing TVs and lights to be turned on and off with a handclap—was promising, but it utterly failed to usher in an age of smart appliances that would do our bidding without even being asked. The contraptions in SkyMall magazine run decidedly more toward hot-dog-and-bun toasters than something as futuristic as, say, an airport-screening device that actually works.

Given that the first big jump to the Internet, networked computers and e-commerce started more than a decade ago, we're perfectly poised for a perennially recurring panic that we're in a new Dark Ages and that the major innovation necessary to pull us out of our current recession is never going to happen.

Mission accomplished: The war on boys

No decade has gone by in the U.S. without some sort of brouhaha over changing gender roles. Typically, the root fear is that boys are becoming sissified dandies. In the 1950s, masculinists decried "Momism," the control of the household by the pants-wearing monster formerly known as Mother (think of the film "Rebel Without a Cause").

Over the past decade, wise observers looked past corporate boardrooms and legislatures and pooh-poohed the idea that men still rule the world. Instead, they fretted over the diminished prospects for boys, who fail at school, get arrested and are unemployed at significantly higher rates than girls. No wonder they are also more heavily medicated and diagnosed with attention-deficit disorder too. (Who can concentrate when your future is so bleak you might end up reporting to a woman?) Many colleges have even acknowledged that they practice affirmative action to pump up the Y chromosome counts on campus. It's only a matter of time before Very Serious People take up the question of what we can do with this most dangerous of endangered species.

We need to reinflate the higher-education bubble

Forget about all the worries aired in the past decade that college was a cruel hoax that was creating an impoverished underclass that could only find work as baristas. Forget everything you heard about "Generation Debt," those sad-sack college grads coming out of universities with crushing debt that keeps them from fully participating in The American Dream, aka securing a mortgage that they can't really afford. (Forget, too, that the typical graduating senior comes out owing just $23,200 and will only make somewhere between $200,000 and $1 million more over the course of her career thanks to her sheepskin.) And forget that only about 53% of college students have graduated six years after starting school.

In the 2010s, the fear will be that college enrollments in the U.S. will tank, especially as higher-ed costs (thanks to massive amounts of student aid) continue to spiral upward like health-care costs. Sure, community-college attendance will surge, but four-year enrollments were already flat in the Aughts. How will the country compete with China (see above) and other rising nations if the next generation isn't taking three semesters of advanced calculus and earning enough engineering degrees to build an infinite number of bridges to the future? And how will America's children ever move out of their parents' homes if they don't immediately make more than the national average upon graduation?

Why have the kids stopped having sex?

From at least the 1920s on, the older generation has consistently fretted over the possibility that the younger generation was not only having more sex than adults did, but that they were enjoying it more, too. Now prepare for the opposite. According to the Alan Guttmacher Institute and other sources that track this sort of thing, high-schoolers are actually scoring less and having fewer pregnancies since the 1990s. Whatever the cause for the slowdown in sex, as insolvency for America's Social Security and Medicare systems comes closer to reality and the true costs of health-care reform and record-setting budget deficits become clear, expect a series of prurient exposés on the trouble with promise rings and alarmist reports worrying about who exactly is going to pay for Baby Boomers' entitlements.

The above list is hardly exhaustive, of course. For instance, it is unimaginable that America will go 10 full years without a White House Conference on the Coarsening of Culture, that some form of deadly yet cuddly mammal will be identified as near extinction even as its population is increasing, that we will suddenly recognize that our core common culture is threatened by the failure to teach "The Brady Bunch" in the K-12 curriculum, and that viruses are either multiplying or disappearing altogether at an alarming rate. The important thing is that such outsize and overblown fears distract us from what really matters. Which may not be such a bad thing, especially if we suffer another decade like this past one.

Nick Gillespie is the editor in chief of Reason.tv and Reason.com.

The catalog for L.L. Bean's Signature line (top left) will look more like a fashion magazine than the label's usual mailings. The new line at Lands' End (lower left, lower middle and far right) is meant to have a more relaxed, less straight-arrow vibe.

(Clockwise from top left) L.L. Bean, Lands' End (3)

Dolling up a dowdy label

L.L. Bean and Lands' End launch lines aimed at younger customers

By Ray A. Smith

Catalog retailers L.L. Bean and Lands' End don't exactly bring to mind the word "cool." But both are trying to amp up their style quotient with new lines aimed at younger customers. That means tighter women's shirts, low-rise pants and the virtual disappearance of the baggy pleated khakis that once were prevalent in both lines. L.L. Bean, a 97-year-old icon of New England style, also is introducing dressier clothes—suits for men and heels for women—and updating classic items such as its buffalo plaid shirt, canvas tote bag and hunting boots with new colors and materials.

The shift isn't dramatic; there are no skin-tight jeans or lingerie looks here. Still, it is a big step away from the fleecy outdoors apparel and the boxy, middle-of-the-road styles for which both retailers are known. L.L. Bean and Lands' End see an opportunity to engage younger consumers amid a vogue for "Americana"—plaid shirts, chino pants and oxford shirts.

Fashionable designer brands recently have been creating modern versions of classics that Bean and Lands' End have been selling for years, and the catalog retailers are determined not to be outdone by hipster upstarts. As part of the push for younger customers, L.L. Bean and Lands' End are using social media such as Facebook and Twitter and YouTube videos to promote their new lines. The two plan to lean more heavily on Web sites created for the lines; Lands' End is even eschewing a catalog for its new Canvas line, though it is considering a "magalog" aimed at driving consumers to order online. "It's a different step forward for us, but one that makes sense for where this customer shops," says Nick Coe, president of Lands' End, which is owned by Sears Holding.

L.L. Bean, meanwhile, is creating a catalog for its new line that looks like a fashion magazine, with models moving about on city streets, along boardwalks and inside fabulous apartments—a big departure from the clothier's trademark pages of product shots.

Still, the two brands face hurdles in making themselves relevant to consumers in their 20s and 30s. Younger people generally don't shop by catalog. And when Mintel International earlier this year surveyed adults who had recently bought merchandise from a catalog, just 8% of 18-to-24-year-olds said they had ordered something from L.L. Bean. The figure was 10% for 25-to-34-year-olds. The trends were similar for Lands' End.

Alex Gardell, a 22-year-old college student who says she loves to shop at stores like J. Crew and Forever 21, is the kind of customer both brands are targeting. She is also an example of what the brands are up against.

Ms. Gardell, who lives in New York City, says she can't remember the last thing she ordered from L.L. Bean or Lands' End. "It might have been a functional fleece to go skiing," she says. "I go through the catalogs, and I don't really see anything that jumps out at me and makes me want to buy. It's kind of dowdy. What comes to mind is pleated khaki pants and zip-up fleeces that come in 18 different colors but don't really have style." Still, she says she would be willing to give the new collections a look.

For both brands, the biggest difference lies in fit. To design its Signature line, which launches in March, L.L. Bean tapped Alex Carleton, who founded fashion line Rogues Gallery and once worked as a designer at Bean. Signature alters the silhouettes of the label's clothing, such as men's work shirts and women's shirt dresses. In some cases, it changes the fabrics, using chambray rather than poplin, for instance. Also, pants for both men and women have shorter rises, the length of the fabric from the crotch seam to the top of the waistband. Prices will be slightly higher than those in L.L. Bean's core line.

"Younger consumers tend to be looking for a closer fit and have a different way of wearing their clothes," explains Chris Vickers, vice president of L.L. Bean Signature. The buildup of dressier clothing was intended to help consumers build a complete L.L. Bean wardrobe, he says, rather than being limited to casual weekend wear.

L.L. Bean

L.L. Bean is updating iconic items with new colors and materials.

Similarly, Lands' End's Canvas collection, which went on sale in November, updates clothing from the brand's archives—chinos, oxford shirts, cardigans—with a more modern fit. Lands' End, whose origins lie in sailing apparel, even warns on Canvas's Web site that a women's oxford shirt runs small. The clothes are also characterized by a softer, more relaxed feel. They are prewashed for a more broken-in look, and many of the poplin, oxford and polo shirts arrive unpressed and minimally packaged to give them a "relaxed, lived-in style," according to Canvas's Web site. Mr. Coe says Web feedback from consumers in their 20s and 30s so far has been positive.

Tom Julian, president of brand-consulting firm Tom Julian Group, says it's almost mandatory for older brands like these to incorporate contemporary touches, but they shouldn't try to be too trendy, which could alienate existing fans and risk looking like they are trying too hard. It can be done. Abercrombie & Fitch, Banana Republic and J. Crew each at first had limited appeal with a particular look (safari/travel for Banana Republic, for example) but found ways to expand appropriately, he notes.

In addition to their ability to tap the vogue for classic American workwear and casual clothes, L.L. Bean and Lands' End have several things in their favor. Both brands' apparel are reasonably priced—an important attribute for today's cost-conscious consumer.

In addition, shopping from home has been more popular since the bust of the conspicuous-consumption bubble. While sales of apparel fell 2.4% at direct-mail retailers such as L.L. Bean during the 12-month period that ended Oct. 31, it was worse at department stores, where sales fell 9.6%, according to market researcher NPD Group. (L.L. Bean and Lands' End are opening stores for these new collections.)

Madison Riley, managing director at retail consulting firm Kurt Salmon Associates, says that both brands' long histories as direct-mail merchants will help them. "Should demand increase [from younger consumers], they'll be able to rapidly adjust and service that demand," she says. But keeping up with young consumers is not an easy task, as successful brands freshen their lines with new styles frequently these days. "Just jumping on Facebook doesn't mean you're going to be relevant with young people," says David Bassuk, a managing director at business-advisory firm AlixPartners's retail practice. The brands "will have to do some work bringing consumers what they want at the speed they want...and responding more quickly to trends. It's a very different capability."

Michael Williams, the 31-year-old founder of style blog "A Continuous Lean," notes that the Americana trend already has gone mainstream. "People who led the look are starting to move on," he says. Of course, the mass audience is still wearing the style. But "L.L. Bean and Lands' End are coming at the tail end of this from a trendsetter perspective," he says.

Shoes made for selling

The studded Otway is the 'It' boot of this season

By Rachel Dodes

The day after French designer Isabel Marant unveiled her Fall/Winter 2009 collection in Paris in March, the Web sites for boutiques across the U.S. were flooded with emails about studded ankle-high boots, asking when they would be arriving and whether they could be ordered in advance. Monika Beurmann, a 35-year-old IT consultant from Chicago, says that while looking at the fashion show on Style.com, she "fell in love with the futuristic design of the heel," and preordered a pair from Diani, a boutique in Southern California.

The boots in question, which didn't hit stores until September, are called "Otway," and they can fairly be called the "It" boots of the season. Made of supple suede, the cuffed booties are adorned with rows of circular studs and are held up by a 10-centimeter triangular heel.

Those who are still interested in owning them can forget about it. With the exception of a few pairs on eBay, they are out of stock nearly everywhere, despite a $1,295 price tag.

Mary Blair, a 45-year-old mother of three from California, recently got her boots after being on a waiting list for two months. Upon seeing the Otway style in a magazine, "I just thought, 'Oh my god I have to have those.' They kept creeping their way into my brain," she says.

The edgy boots were a departure for Ms. Marant, who is known for her bohemian style. In an email, she said that the inspiration for the Otway came from "this need to...push back a little against the look for my short silk chiffon print dresses."

Curve, a boutique in New York, Los Angeles and Miami, sold out of the boot within a few days in September. The boutique Diani sold all but two pairs of its stock over the phone before the shoes hit the floor in October and still has a 20-person waiting list. Barneys New York says that aside from one pair in a small size in its L.A. store, it is sold out of the boot in black, though it still has a few left in a camel color. On eBay a used pair is being offered for $1,000, while new ones are selling at full price. Isabel Marant declined to specify how many Otway boots were produced for the U.S. market, but retailers estimate that a few hundred were sold in the U.S.

Although she's considered to be an "emerging" designer, Ms. Marant, 42 years old, isn't a newcomer to the fashion scene. After attending fashion school in Paris and designing accessories for high-fashion brands such as Claude Montana, Ms. Marant started her eponymous brand in 1994 and slowly built a following among stylists, fashion editors and models.

A major part of the brand's allure is its rarity. Until this season, when Isabel Marant accessories were sold at luxury emporium Barneys New York, Ms. Marant's goods could be found only at a handful of small boutiques in the U.S.

Because the brand carefully limits orders, products rarely go on sale. In addition, Ms. Marant forbids retailers from selling her products online, or even posting images of them. Disclosing prices online is also against the rules. Instead, stores often note on their Web sites that they have Ms. Marant's items in stock and list a phone number where customers can preorder the goods, sight unseen. The fashion label's chief executive, Sophie Durufle, says "our manufacturing decisions are guided by a strong desire to help preserve the French traditional 'savoir faire.'" She adds that the brand "never entered e-commerce since that really wasn't our profession."

That's about to change. This spring, the company will begin selling to the upscale e-commerce site Net-a-Porter.com. Ms. Marant also will open her first U.S. boutique in New York early next year. Such moves are unsettling to small boutiques, which have done brisk business by servicing Ms. Marant's rabid fans. "We'll see how it goes," says Nadine Ferber, owner of the New York boutique Mick Margo, which has sold Ms. Marant's line for four years. "Maybe we will have to find the next Isabel Marant."

Ms. Marant's success is highly unusual at a grim time for the luxury industry. Sales of luxury goods in the U.S. are expected to fall 16% this year, according to a study by Bain & Co., making it the world's hardest-hit market for high-end clothing and accessories. Limiting supply has helped Ms. Marant to stoke demand.

"She played her cards in a very cool French way," says Nevena Borissova, owner of Curve, which is Ms. Marant's biggest retail client in the U.S. "She won't supply the demand of America just because we get obsessed with something." After discovering that the "Forbes" boot—a suede, modified cowboy boot that the designer repeats every season—was out of stock at a local boutique, Marina Mazur, a 50-year-old American who lives in London, called one of Ms. Marant's boutiques in Paris to see if she could place an order. "They said, 'Oh, we don't ship outside of Paris. If you want the boots, you have to come and get them,'" she says.

Enterprising individuals have made a killing selling Ms. Marant's designs on eBay. In December, Sarah Dwyer of Minnesota sold a plain pair of brown Isabel Marant ankle boots for $405, more than four times their offered price on eBay, after receiving 27 bids.

The Isabel Marant frenzy can be traced to a boot that the designer put on the runway two seasons ago, Ms. Borissova says. The "Soono" boot was a slouchy suede knee-high boot covered in chains. Celebrities like Rihanna, Cameron Diaz and Jennifer Lopez ordered it at Curve before the shoes even arrived.

Ms. Borissova, who ordered 28 pairs of the Soono, says that the company delivered only three pairs. She flew to Paris to plead with the designer to produce more. The brand resisted, but after she committed to a €50,000 (about $70,000) order, the company agreed to recreate the $1,300 boot. For now, retailers are bracing themselves for next season's hot boot, the "Dana," a fringed style in several different colors, including a camouflage print.

Jennifer Mankins, owner of the Brooklyn boutique Bird, missed out on the Otway boot because she thought the style was too outré for her customers. But she's ordering the new fringed boot in several colors and heights for spring. Because Ms. Marant's fan base has grown considerably, she says, "it gives me confidence that I can buy something a little out there and there will be enough people willing to spend money on it."

Above, designer Isabel Marant; right, Ms. Marant's Otway boot; below, actress Sienna Miller sports a pair.

Benoit Peverelli (Marant); Isabel Marant (boot); Getty Images (Miller)

A FRESH START

Asian villages carve out a new life

By Steve Mollman

The village of Tmatboey in the northern plains of Cambodia seemed to have little going for it. It lacked clean water; there were no real roads. The people toiled mostly at subsistence farming, barely scraping by.

The villagers didn't realize they had a valuable asset—hiding in plain sight, so to speak: a tourist attraction that a niche group of international travelers would happily pay to see, even if it meant a stay in basic accommodations.

It's a bird. Actually, two: the long-legged giant ibis and the white-shouldered ibis, both among the rarest in the world. In the eyes of hard-core bird-watchers, they carry near-mythical status.

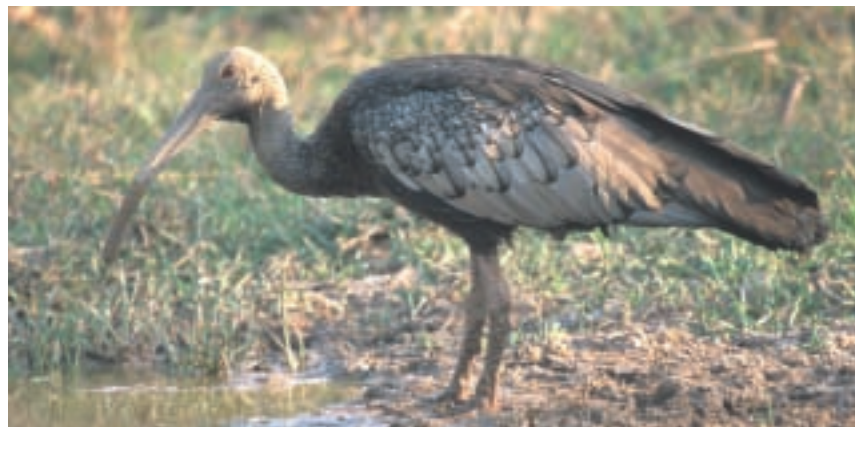
And now they're making money for Tmatboey. In 2004, the Wildlife Conservation Society, which credits itself with having saved the American bison a century ago, set up the Tmatboey Ibis Ecotourism Project to lure bird-watchers. During the most recent peak season, November 2008 to May 2009, providing services to bird-watching visitors brought in more than $12,000 all told, a fortune by local standards. About 30% went into a community fund for improving basics like education and plumbing; today, life in Tmatboey has been significantly improved by new wells, water pumps, roads and a new school.

In villages in many parts of Asia, nonprofit groups from around the world are putting into practice that time-worn proverb: Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day, but teach a man to fish and you feed him for a lifetime. Rather than donating clothes or books, handing out mosquito nets or building schools, they're bringing money-making enterprises to rural Asian communities. Some involve training in activities such as sewing and bamboo craft; many are tourist-related.

Among environmental groups, there has been a shift in the past decade or so toward "a more integrated view of conservation and development," says Graham Bullock, a former ecotourism coordinator for the Nature Conservancy's China program. For instance, says Tom Clements, a technical adviser to the Wildlife Conservation Society's Cambodia program, the Tmatboey project works "by empowering local people to manage their own tourism enterprise, in a way that explicitly links revenue received to conservation outcomes."

WCS (birders); Allan Michaud (ibis); Wildlife Alliance (Chi Phat)

Bird-watchers flock to the village of Tmatboey, Cambodia, (below) to see the long-legged giant ibis (bottom), a rare species that carries near-mythical status among hard-core birders.



The goals of each organization vary, of course, as do the circumstances of each village. "One size definitely does not fit all," says Mr. Bullock. But more organizations now seek "the participation and empowerment of local communities," he adds.

Below, a pair of projects aimed at helping villages help themselves.

Chi Phat Commune, Cambodia

The Chi Phat Commune—a collection of four villages that's home to about 550 families, or nearly 3,000 people in all—sits on the banks of the Piphot River in Cambodia's Cardamom mountains near the Thai border. Getting there from Phnom Penh takes four to five hours and involves two highways and a scenic ride upriver on a long-tail boat.

The villagers get by mostly on rice farming and fishing. To make extra money, some work as laborers on nearby plantations. Others sell livestock and other goods at the local market.

And some engage in illegal activities like poaching and logging—which, along with land-clearing for farming, have exacted a heavy environmental toll. While large animals including elephants still roam the Cardamoms, their numbers—along with those of scaly anteaters, wild pigs, deer, monkeys, bears and lizards

Above: As part of its effort to build Chi Phat, Cambodia, into an ecotourism gateway, the U.S. nonprofit Wildlife Alliance trained villagers to provide services, including bicycle maintenance; left, a group of mountain-bike riders on tour near Chi Phat.

known as Bengal monitors—are dwindling. And so is their habitat, one of Southeast Asia's largest remaining tracts of rainforest.

After studying the Chi Phat village situation, the Wildlife Alliance, a Washington D.C.-based nonprofit founded in 1994 with the goal of protecting wildlife, forests and oceans, concluded that poverty was the root cause of wildlife and forest loss in the Cardamoms. The alliance also saw that ecotourism—the area's thick forest, winding streams and rivers and abundant wildlife make it ideal for mountain biking and trekking—offered the possibility both of alleviating poverty and leading villagers to see value in the nature surrounding them.

Before Wildlife Alliance started to help develop Chi Phat as an ecotourism gateway (its Web site: www.mountainbikingcardamoms.com), though, it approached not only villagers, but also local authorities and tour operators to see if the project could fly. One challenge would be attracting customers; little has been written about the area. Another would be explaining ecotourism to the locals.

"Often throughout the world, NGOs enter a local community telling them that tourism is the answer to their problems and very much raising expectations, without any consultation with local tour operators to see whether there will actually be any market for what they are proposing," says Mark

Ellison, who runs Asia Adventures, an independent tour operator. "Then one or two years down the line they sit back and scratch their heads wondering why after all the training, capacity building, meetings, and infrastructure development, no tourists are coming."

Today a handful of private companies make up the Friends of Chi Phat tour-operator group, which works with Wildlife Alliance to attract tourists. They market Chi Phat as a destination, handle reservations and bring guests to and from the village.

The "Friends" operators can charge tourists whatever they wish, but they pay upfront for services provided by the villagers, such as cooking, guiding, bike maintenance and lodging. About 80% goes to the villager providing the services; the remaining 20% goes into a community fund that improves the village's education, water supply, roads and so on.

Of course some training was needed at first: The villagers of remote Chi Phat were not accustomed to seeing tourists, much less catering to them. In fact, says Mr. Ellison, "until a few years ago many of the locals had not even seen a foreigner."

So in early 2008, Wildlife Alliance—which established a permanent base in the village in January 2007 (after more than four years of research)—and its tour-operator partners set up training programs in sanitation, hospitality, English, first-aid and waste management.

A bike mechanic, for instance, was brought in from Phnom Penh to teach villagers how to maintain a modern mountain bike. The hiking and biking trails were created by former hunters and loggers from the village, who now serve as trail guides. So far they've finished two mountain-biking trails (both there-and-back routes) and four circular trekking trails, including some night-camping sites. More trails are in the works.

Not surprisingly, old habits die hard. One villager who was asked to head the group for transporting guests on motorbikes was caught transporting something else instead: a wild pig. The local village council demoted him, with a warning that another transgression would get him kicked out of the project.

"People have been dependent on the forest for livelihoods and domestic needs for quite some time now—and still are," says Oran Shapira, a 33-year-old Israeli working in Chi Phat for the Wildlife Alliance. "This will not completely change in one day or one year. It's a process."

Tourists stay in a handful of villager huts that have been converted—with help from the Wildlife Alliance—to accommodate guests. They're still rustic, but a little better-equipped than before. Squat toilets were added, for instance, so that guests didn't have to relieve themselves in the fields.

The first guests arrived early in 2008, and by year's end there had been about 200. Last year, the village received more than 670 guests, who biked, hiked, swam in the river and played volleyball with the locals.

Asia Adventures charges $250 a person for a three-day trip that includes a one-day mountain-biking excursion and transport to and from Phnom Penh. In 2008 the village collected about $7,000, says Mr. Shapira; last year, more than $19,200.

David Miller, who works for the Australian Taxation Office in Canberra, visited Chi Phat for three nights in December 2008. He wasn't expecting luxury: "You don't go visit a place in the middle of the jungle if you're expecting comfort all the way," he says.

He went on a guided hike one day and on a mountain-biking trip another. "Cycling through remote jungle, and not recognizing much of the flora, made it much more exciting" than biking back in Australia, he says. His tour guides were village men who didn't speak English but were friendly, communicated well with body language, and knew the forest like the back of their hands.

On his bike trip, he passed large swaths of burned land. (Fires not only clear land but also chase out animals, making them easier to catch.) "I don't know of many other ways to offer alternatives to these people so they will stop cutting down the rain forest," he says. "Action like ecotourism is better than no action at all."

Nawung, Indonesia

In 2006, an earthquake in central Java reduced many small villages to near rubble. But aside from some light damage to a few ramshackle buildings, the quake had little outward effect on Nawung, a rural village of about 500 people in the foothills near Yogyakarta. Below the surface, however, was a different story: Geological shifts caused the village's few natural wells to dry up.

Wildlife Alliance (Chi Phat); ASB Indonesia (Nawung)

Top, tourists in Chi Phat on a guided wildlife tour; above, Arbeiter-Samariter-Bund, a German aid group, trained some of the villagers in Nawung, Indonesia, to craft stone sculptures and housewares.

It was a blow to farming, the village mainstay, already a challenge in the dry, hilly land. The village needed a new gig.

Enter Arbeiter-Samariter-Bund, a century-old German aid organization that bolsters rural communities through reconstruction, livelihood training and disaster-risk reduction. Some years ago in Kosovo, it reconstructed homes and taught returning war refugees to cultivate saffron as a cash crop.

At the time of the Java earthquake, more than half the people of Nawung earned less than $1 a day, says Sae Kani, an ASB program manager for Indonesia who specializes in disaster-risk-reduction education. Young villagers typically left to find work in retail, manufacturing, housekeeping or construction in places like Jakarta and Yogyakarta.

But in 2007, ASB noticed the village had something going for it—a new road linking Nawung with Yogyakarta, 45 kilometers to the west, and other significant towns, including Sleman, to the northwest, and Wonosari, to the south. The road—a scenic route through hills, forests and paddy fields—significantly boosted the trade and tourism potential between Nawung and Yogyakarta, a hub for Indonesian arts and crafts, as well as other towns and villages.

Within this setting, ASB set out to help make the village self-reliant by teaching villagers to make crafts and foods that they could sell to nearby merchants and retailers.

The ASB team—three field staff members and a project manager (plus, in the beginning, an architect and engineer)—moved into the village and set up workshops to train villagers in four skills: bamboo weaving, stone carving, textile making and food preparation.

The food-preparation group is the largest, with about 50 members, all women. Tumiyem, a mother of two small children who like many Indonesians goes by a

single name, is one of them. Through an interpreter she says that before the training, "we knew nothing about cooking snacks." Now, she says, the benefit is two-fold: The women can generate extra income and "we can gather with our friends regularly."

About 18 men studied stone craft; now nine of them churn out soap dishes, small statues and water fountains for gardens. The textile group—three women and two men—sew pillowcases and containers.

ASB helps with marketing and business connections, teaches bookkeeping and profit management, and provides a little start-up capital for each group. The food-preparation group, for instance, received about $550, part of which went to buy supplies.

Sales are climbing. Last year a woman named Atun who makes chips—primarily from banana and cassava—sold about $390 of her snacks from July to November, compared with $110 in the first six months of the year. The stone-masonry group, which sells most of its products to a pair of buyers from Yogyakarta, saw the biggest jump in sales: Between March and November, it pulled in nearly $900, up from about $110 for all of 2008.

ASB has spent about $100,000 on the project, along the way building things such as a small showroom to display the village's goods, production and storage houses for the bamboo-weaving and stone-masonry groups and a Web site (www.nawung.com). Its three staff members in Nawung will stay through the end of this year, when ASB plans to focus more on tourism development and improved marketing for village handicrafts.

The German nonprofit also set up a microfinance fund within each group so members can take out small loans. For instance in the food group, borrowers can obtain three-month loans at an interest rate of 5% a month. (The interest income is used to benefit the groups, such as for raw materials.) And villagers have a good track record of repaying the loans, which they've used for a variety of purposes. Last spring, for example, a member of the stone-craft group named Tukino borrowed $21 to buy fertilizer and pay his children's school fees.

Today, Nawung is on the upswing: New homes are springing up, streets are better paved and cellphones are a more common sight. More important, when ASB leaves, the skills it has taught will likely remain.

Steve Mollman is a writer based in Asia.

Designing a future

How an earthquake led one Indian village to change tack

By Margot Cohen

In 2001, Bhadli village was a wreck. An earthquake had destroyed most of its 325 houses. In this remote district of Kachchh, formerly called Kutch—a land of desert plains, rocky hills and cracked salt marshes in India's western state of Gujarat—deaths totaled more than 12,000.

The quake also jolted the livelihoods of the area's many skilled artisans, whose handicrafts include embroidery, block-printing, weaving and *bandhani*, a tie-dyeing technique particularly prized by India's big-city designers.

After the disaster, aid poured in. Dozens of organizations rushed to build houses. Designers stepped up, placing more orders for clothing and accessories.

But those designers often dictated brand-new patterns that artisans struggled to follow. Two brothers in Bhadli, Aziz Khatri, 31 years old, and Suleman Khatri, 33, decided their future lay down a different road. Rather than supplying tie-dyed cloth to order as they had before the earthquake, they would travel 105 kilometers to an innovative design school called Kala Raksha Vidhyalaya, and return to make their own tunics, scarves and other products.

Offering classes in a series of six intensive two-week residential sessions, with students returning home for several weeks in between to work on projects—and attend to household and religious duties—the school aims to help Kachchh's artisans hone their sense of design by mastering principles of color, texture and composition. The brothers attended separately, Aziz in 2006 and Suleman in 2007. They pored over color swatches, theme boards—basically collages on a specific theme, used for inspiration—and textile-trend forecasts. They made field trips to high-end stores and hotels in Gujarat, to better understand urban markets, and scrutinized century-old handiwork in museums to draw inspiration from their own traditions. Digesting all the material was tough. "We were studying until 2 a.m. or 3 a.m.," recalls the younger brother.

Since attending the school, the Khatri brothers have scored with merchants who scoop up the pieces they design. Monthly earnings run about 35,000 rupees (about $760), three times what they were in 2005. What's more, to meet demand from big customers like Fabindia, which has 109 stores in India and six more overseas, the brothers employ 250 women from Bhadli and surrounding villages, four times as many as in 2005. And these workers earn up to 200 rupees ($4.32) a day, 20% more than in 2005.

Pulling a silk scarf from a fluttering pile, the younger brother, Aziz, strokes his fingers over its blended autumnal colors and tiny patterned dots. "Color is rhythm," he says. "Look how it goes from mustard to brown." The shifting concentration of dots, he adds, brings balance to the overall design.

Building that kind of design vocabulary is one step toward increasing self-confidence and spurring homegrown creativity, says American anthropologist Judy Frater, who founded the school in 2005 with an advisory board of master artisans in Kachchh. Having studied and written about the area since the 1970s—sleeping in mud huts and riding camels—Ms. Frater was disturbed by the "short-cut" approach to product design that she was increasingly seeing in Gujarat.

"The development in craft has been based on the industrial model, where you want to make things uniform, you want to make them fast, and you want to make them cheap," says the 58-year-old scholar and activist, who now lives in Bhuj, Kachchh's administrative center. She calls that the "antithesis of craft," adding, "It will be the death of craftspeople."

Sephi Bergerson for The Wall Street Journal

Judy Frater, second from left, is shown here at a craft sale in Delhi selling her wares with some of the artisans she's trained.

So far, 78 students have graduated from the school, housed in a complex of distressed-brick buildings in Tunda Vandh village. It recruits artisans with diverse handicraft backgrounds, both male and female—though men and women take classes separately, to accommodate local cultural norms. The students' previous education is equally varied: Some are illiterate while others are high-school graduates with a knack for operating computers. But all must produce a "final collection" of clothing and accessories at year's end.

Striking a balance between modern market savvy and traditional knowledge is key to assisting India's estimated 14 million craftspeople, according to Anmol Vellani, executive director of the Bangalore-based India Foundation for the Arts. "When you have an exclusive focus on the market, it's very likely that [artisans] will forget their knowledge base and history," he says. "In losing that, they lose the ability to adjust to the market, because they have lost their repertoire."

The Kala Raksha Vidhyalaya school "gives them a sense of direction, a sense of pride and a sense of achievement," says Errol Pires, a senior faculty member at the National Institute of Design in Gujarat's biggest city, Ahmedabad. It's India's premier state-run design school.

The fledgling Kachchh school "has helped in creating exposure for the younger artisans," says William Bissell, Fabindia's managing director.

In some Gujarat villages, Kala Raksha Vidhyalaya also has helped to shift the balance of power by allowing fresh graduates to challenge the market dominance of families with longstanding connections to sales outlets, according to visiting faculty.

Still, raising funds has been a struggle. Initially propelled by a grant from Unesco, the school requires some 3.5 million rupees (about $73,000) a year to operate, including scholarships for each student. Male students now pay 10,000 rupees (about $200), but the women from the nomadic Rabari community can't afford that.

"In the beginning, it was hard. But with time, we learned more, and it got easier," recalls 52-year-old Lachhuben Raja Rabari, an illiterate embroiderer and former Kala Raksha Vidhyalaya student whose tattooed limbs and elongated earlobes are fading out of fashion among younger generations of Rabari women. She says she particularly enjoyed a visit to a local ice factory, where the cracked ice inspired her to sketch delicate new patterns.

Not every student has managed to match the achievements of the Khatri brothers in Bhadli. In Nirona village, for example, 19-year-old Magan Govind admits that his spirits were dashed by a trip to New Delhi, where his cotton shawls failed to find buyers. But Mr. Govind's grandfather, Lalji Lakha, says that he still plans to send Magan's younger brother to Kala Raksha Vidhyalaya, convinced that it will teach him "something new" and eventually help boost income in the village.

In late November, the school held its big annual fashion competition—a suspenseful event somewhat akin to the TV reality show "Project Runway," except that no one gets kicked off the ramp. This year, the prize for best collection went to Rajesh Vishrambhai, a slender 22-year-old student raised in a family of hand-loom weavers in Bhujodi village. Departing from the customary emphasis on a flat weave, Mr. Vishrambhai designed a playful yellow wrap jiggling with rows of pom-poms. "It's for the young generation," he says. But in other shawls, the jaunty weaver made sure to incorporate traditional geometric motifs—and preserve a link to the past.

Margot Cohen is a writer based in Bangalore.

WEEKEND JOURNAL
ASIA

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Black and white and blue

Two culture-clash stories: 'Avatar' dazzles, 'Invictus' inspires

By Joe Morgenstern

Twentieth Century Fox ('Avatar'); Warner Bros. Pictures ('Invictus')

Above, Zoe Saldana and Sam Worthington take alien form in 'Avatar'; left, Matt Damon leads South Africa's rugby team in 'Invictus.'

James Cameron's "Avatar" takes place on a planet called Pandora, where American corporations and their military mercenaries have set up bases to mine a precious mineral called unobtanium. The vein of awe mined by the movie is nothing short of unbelievium. This is a new way of coming to your senses—put those 3-D glasses on your face and you come to a sense of delight that quickly gives way to a sense of astonishment.

The planetary high doesn't last. The closer the story comes to a lumbering parable of colonialist aggression in the jungles of an extragalactic Vietnam, the more the enchantment fizzles. Much of the time, though, you're transfixed by the beauty of a spectacle that seems all of a piece.

The word "avatar" wasn't invented by Mr. Cameron. In Hindu myth, an avatar is a deity descended to earth in human form. In computer parlance it's an icon that represents a person in virtual reality or cyberspace. In the movie it's a manufactured body that's remotely controlled—not by some handheld clicker but through brain waves generated by a human being who functions as the body's driver.

If this sounds technobabbly in the description, it's dazzling in the execution. The main driver-to-be is an ex-Marine, Jake Sully (Sam Worthington) whose combat injuries have left him confined to a wheelchair. He's part of a scientific program run by a tough cookie named Grace Augustine (Sigourney Weaver). The program has begun to explore Pandora, whose atmosphere is toxic to earthlings, using avatars with recombinant DNA—part human, part alien—constructed along the lines of the planet's dominant species; they're very tall, very blue and Superman-agile. The movie offers several lyrical passages, but one of the best belongs to Jake. It's when he inhabits his avatar for the first time and discovers that his new legs can take his lithe new body through some of the most sublime scenery on not-Earth.

No description of that scenery will spoil the experience of the 3-D process or the seamless integration of live action, motion-capture, animation, computer-generated images and whatever other techniques went into the mix. Some of the flora suggest an anhydrous Great Barrier Reef (airborne jellyfish, coral-colored conical plants) or, in the case of Pandora's floating mountains, represent an homage to the Japanese animation master Hayao Miyazaki. As for the fauna, they're not only prodigiously varied—flamboyant dragons, six-legged steeds, elephantine chargers with heads like battering rams—but creatures with convincing lives of their own.

Then there are the indigènes, the French term for natives being appropriate because Pandora evokes the Indochina that existed before France's doomed war against an indigenous insurgency, as well as the Vietnam that became a battleground for American troops. They're called the Na'vi and the most beautiful is a female warrior named Neytiri (Zoe Saldana). Jake falls for her in a big but complicated way.

Big because Ms. Saldana's Neytiri is so alluring—cerulean-skinned, lemon-eyed, wasp-waisted, long-tailed, anvil-nosed, wiggly-eared (trust me, it's all seductive) and given to feral snarls in the heat of battle. But complicated because Jake is secretly working both sides of the jungle. He's in love with Neytiri, and soon embraces her people's values. At the same time, Jake is spying for a gimlet-eyed military commander, Col. Miles Quaritch (Stephen Lang). The evil colonel has promised the ex-Marine a procedure that will restore the use of his paralyzed legs in exchange for information that will help chase the Na'vi from their sacred land, which happens to be the only place to obtain unobtainium.

The fantasy quotient of "Avatar" takes its first major hit when the Na'vi take their first hit from the American military. Mr. Cameron has devoted a significant chunk of his movie to a dark, didactic and altogether horrific evocation of Vietnam, complete with napalm, Agent Orange and helicopter gunships.

Other narrative problems intrude. "Avatar" lapses into lurid savage rituals that would not have seemed out of place in the first "King Kong." And while Ms. Weaver's performance is a strong one, it isn't clear what her character is doing as an avatar. What is clear, though, is that Mr. Cameron's singular vision has upped the ante for filmed entertainment, and given us a travelogue unlike any other. I wouldn't want to live on Pandora, mainly because of the bad air, but I'm glad to have paid it a visit.

Invictus

Clint Eastwood's new movie is an inspirational game played by Morgan Freeman as Nelson Mandela and Matt Damon as the captain of a South African rugby team. It's also a win-win situation in which a mainstream feature works equally well as stirring entertainment and a history lesson about a remarkable convergence of sports and statesmanship.

The time is 1995. Nelson Mandela, a free man after 27 years in prison, has just become president of a postapartheid South Africa that's still in racial turmoil. To help unify the nation, Mr. Mandela embraces the most unlikely of popular causes, a team, called the Springboks, that has been a symbol of white supremacy.

This may sound like some high-concept notion concocted by a Hollywood studio, but the notion was Mr. Mandela's from the start—he'd been a passionate athlete as a young man—and Anthony Peckham's script takes no more than reasonable liberties with the solid reporting of John Carlin's book "Playing the Enemy." South Africa's first black president did reach out to inspire the team's white captain; the team did shake off its losing ways, thereby gaining the devotion of black and white fans alike; and the Springboks did, against huge odds, defeat a supposedly invincible New Zealand team to win the 1995 World Cup championship.

Factual truth doesn't guarantee effective drama, but "Invictus" has something else going for it, the convergence of a great actor and a great character. Morgan Freeman playing Nelson Mandela is like a virtuoso playing Bach on a Stradivarius. Mr. Damon acquits himself honorably, too, as an Afrikaner athlete opening up to the revolution around him.

The filmmaking is undistinguished at best. And for the uninitiated, the charms of rugby are as opaque at the end as they were at the start. Yet the remarkable thing about "Invictus"—the film takes its title, Latin for "unconquered," from the William Ernest Henley poem that occupied a place of honor on Mr. Mandela's prison wall—is that its substance so thoroughly transcends its technique.

Arbitrage

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Agence France-Presse

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Manila	401 pesos	$8.72
Bangkok	350 baht	$10.56
Seoul	13,500 won	$11.84
Frankfurt	€9	$12.93
New York		$14.50
Paris	€11	$15.08
Shanghai	123 yuan	$18.06
Tokyo	¥1,800	$19.58
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Masterpiece / *By Judith H. Dobrzynski*

An Epic Poem in Paint

If ever a work of art merited comparison with epic poetry, "The Battle of Issus" is it. Albrecht Altdorfer's depiction of the moment in 333 B.C. when Alexander the Great routed Darius III for supremacy in Asia Minor is vast in ambition, sweeping in scope, vivid in imagery, rich in symbols, and obviously heroic—the Iliad of painting, as literary critic Friedrich Schlegel suggested.

> The story of 'The Battle of Issus.'

But Altdorfer (1480-1538) and his masterpiece are something of an art-world secret. Altdorfer was an etcher, engraver, architect and prominent public official in Regensburg, Germany, as well as a painter: Fewer than 50 paintings survive him. Like "The Battle of Issus," which hangs in Munich's Alte Pinakothek, most are owned by European museums. None can be found in North America. And Altdorfer flourished at a time when Michelangelo, Raphael, Botticelli and other Italian Renaissance masters far overshadowed most Northern European artists in the common imagination. Albrecht Dürer, who was nine years older than Altdorfer, rightly rules as the genius of German artists in the period. In a back-handed compliment, "The Battle of Issus"—though signed in a prominent banner and with a monogram on the lower left—was once attributed to Dürer.

In his time, though, Altdorfer was prosperous and powerful. The son of an artist, he knew of Dürer, Cranach and Italian artists such as Mantegna. A superb draftsman, with a bold sense of color and a bubbling imagination, Altdorfer was one of the most inventive artists of his age.

Like his contemporaries, he painted religious scenes, portraits and historical works. And he is credited as a founder of—and the best artist in—the Danube School, a circle that pioneered landscape as an independent genre. "He prised landscape out of a mere supplementary relationship to subject-matter," wrote Yale scholar Christopher Wood in "Albrecht Altdorfer and the Origins of Landscape" (1993). They were small, intimate works, mostly.

"The Battle of Issus" is not a landscape, but the painting's monumental setting, beneath a swirling sky, shows his love of the genre, even as it sets the stage for a cosmic battle. At about 5 feet by 4 feet, it's neither small nor intimate.

The work was commissioned in 1528 by Wilhelm IV, Duke of Bavaria, the first in a cycle of eight historical battle scenes destined to hang in the Residenz in Munich. At the time, Suleiman the Magnificent and his Ottoman armies were conquering much of the Middle East, North Africa and Europe, and the duke was about to begin a military campaign against these Turkish invaders. Altdorfer no doubt saw parallels between 1528 and Alexander's time. He turned down his chance to be mayor of Regensburg to take the commission.

On first glance, "The Battle of Issus" is a Cecil B. DeMille production, with a swarming cast of thousands surrounding the central action: Alexander on his white steed, leading two rows of charging cavalrymen, dashes after a fleeing Darius, who looks anxiously over his shoulder from a chariot. Those who move on quickly, though, will miss the work's deeper charms.

The painting, on limewood, can essentially be split horizontally. In the lower half, masses of men fight. The dead are underfoot. Spears and banners are tightly aligned on the Greek side, askew among the Persians.

Altdorfer, playing to contemporary parallels, changed many small points. The men wear contemporary armor. Some Persians wear Turkish turbans. The men charge in formation, reflecting Middle Ages tactics, not ancient ones. Throughout, Altdorfer rendered the details meticulously: Leaves and feathers exhibit their veins, armor displays its shine, helmets show their insignia.

The action is taking place in Asia Minor, and for the top half, Altdorfer paints a panorama that encompasses the eastern Mediterranean, from Greece to Egypt, and stretches to the heavens, too. Art historians say he derived this landscape from maps available at the time, but he also took his liberties.

For one, he reversed what is now convention and placed south at the top. Beyond the eastern Mediterranean lies the island of Cyprus. Beyond that, on the left,

Art Resource

is the Red Sea; across the isthmus, seven fingers of the Nile pierce the delta—an accurate description, as are the three lakes that source the river. But where did he get those unnaturally craggy mountain peaks that inhabit Asia Minor and stretch across what would be North Africa?

The curious banner, bedecked in rose-colored swags and tassel, bisects the work; its cord points directly at Alexander. His inscription was originally written in German "in golden capital letters," according to the Alte Pinakothek, and his banner was twice its current height. It was shrunk and the writing replaced by an unknown hand at an unknown date—probably the late 16th or early 17th century—by a much shorter text in Latin. Actually, the entire painting was reduced in size, possibly to match others in the suite.

A gleaming fireball of a sun, on the right, has perplexed the experts: It shines on Alexander's army, but is it rising or setting? The consensus says setting, with the slivered crescent moon, the Turkish symbol, rising in the left corner over the retreating Persians. The appearance of both heavenly bodies signifies the cosmic nature of the conflict—and was apparently meant to exhort the duke to likewise repel the Turks. Altdorfer finished the painting in 1529; late that year, Suleiman was turned back at the Siege of Vienna.

The overall spectacle is awesome in its flamboyance and intelligence. Yet some experts date its fame to 1800, when Napoleon's soldiers nabbed it as a spoil of war. They moved it to Paris, where it first hung in the Louvre. In 1814, the victorious Prussian army, which was said to have found the painting hanging in Napoleon's bathroom in St. Cloud, recaptured it. They recognized it as an epic achievement, and took it back to Munich.

Ms. Dobrzynski writes for many publications and blogs about the arts at www.artsjournal.com/realcleararts.

Bookshelf / *By Meghan Cox Gurdon*

Hitched, Even Happy

When Elizabeth Gilbert was writing "Eat, Pray, Love" (2006), her quirky account of a year spent variously in Italy, India and Indonesia, she had no idea that it would become a monster best-seller. That's probably a big reason why it went on to become the staple of a thousand book groups: It is full of hilariously unguarded and sometimes wince-making disclosures—particularly about sex—that a writer conscious of the eyes of millions might have omitted. Yet it was the book's very nakedness and exuberant candor that appealed so much to Oprah Winfrey and many other female readers. Its sequel, "Committed," is unlikely to prove as enchanting.

Committed
By Elizabeth Gilbert
(Viking, 285 pages, $26.95)

"Eat, Pray, Love" begins with the author emerging from a horrible divorce, an event that a friend of hers compares to "having a really bad car accident every single day for about two years." It ends, after months of travel, meditation and self-scrutiny, with Ms. Gilbert falling rapturously in love with "Felipe," a Brazilian living in Bali. The world has become Ms. Gilbert's oyster: a place of abundance and spiritual peace, shared with a man who calls her "darling" and wants nothing more than to pour her a glass of wine, prepare a fabulous supper and take her to bed.

"Committed" is Ms. Gilbert's attempt to explain how and why she is able to overcome her horror of matrimony, a "repressive tool" of civilization that she regards as "suffocating, old-fashioned, and irrelevant." That the wedding will take place is never in doubt: The book's subtitle is "A Skeptic Makes Peace with Marriage." The couple tied the knot in 2007.

Nonetheless Ms. Gilbert, at the start of "Committed," is wrestling with her dread of the shackles. To conquer her repulsion, she delves into the history of marriage. She learns that the institution has changed over time: that early Christians favored celibacy over messier domestic arrangements; that a wedding isn't necessarily supposed to be "a delivery device of ultimate bliss." She interviews her mother and friends about married life and learns that both husbands and wives need to make small personal sacrifices if the union is to succeed. This insight would seem stunningly self-evident to anyone who has ever tried to get along with anyone else, but it frightens Ms. Gilbert. Experience has taught her that "every intimacy carries, secreted

somewhere below its initial lovely surfaces, the ever-coiled makings of complete catastrophe."

By far the most entertaining episodes in "Committed" take place in Vietnam, where, as the story unfolds, Elizabeth and Felipe are killing time while he assembles his paperwork for U.S. immigration officials. The delay gives Ms. Gilbert the chance to do a little field work. In one funny scene, she sits down with a group of Hmong women and gamely tries to extract anecdotes about marriage from them. Deploying the sort of question that instantly gets Western women chattering, she asks a wrinkled grandmother where she met her husband. The "very shape of my curiosity seemed a mystery" to the woman, Ms. Gilbert recounts. Whether the woman really knew her husband before their nuptials is a matter of indifference. "As she concluded to the delight of the other women in the room," Ms. Gilbert writes, "she certainly knows him now."

The strain of hanging around waiting for documents begins to show in Ms. Gilbert's own relationship. "Eat, Pray, Love" has yet to become a lucrative hit. The couple is staying in cheap hotels. Such circumstances, not surprisingly, make them scratchy with each other. How scratchy? Fortunately not fatally, but "Committed" is more careful than its predecessor to screen parts of Ms. Gilbert's private life from inquiring eyes. And while that choice may seem wise, it makes the book much less compelling.

Sad to say, "Committed" is also less humane. One of Ms. Gilbert's most endearing qualities in her first memoir was her sunny generosity toward those who see the world differently. In "Committed," she shows less liberality. She finds it "a bit crazy" that social conservatives persist in thinking that marriage means one man and one woman. She is hugely impressed by the pro-marriage arguments of "The Subversive Family," by the British journalist Ferdinand Mount, but is appalled to find that he is conservative. She confesses: "I can honestly say that I never would have ordered this book had I known that fact in advance." And, in an especially unflattering episode, Ms. Gilbert recounts the tense silence that followed her discovery that the small-town mayor summoned to administer her wedding vows is—gasp!—a Republican. This is candor of a less impressive kind. It is bigotry, charm's death-blow.

In the end, Ms. Gilbert realizes that her rebellion against convention has been wrong-headed from the start: "To somehow suggest that society invented marriage, and then forced human beings to bond with each other, is perhaps absurd. It's like suggesting that society invented dentists, and then forced people to grow teeth." She even grasps why we pledge our troth before witnesses. "Marriage is not an act of private prayer," she sees, "it is both a public and private concern, with real-world consequences."

The spectacle of a celebrity author publicly working herself around to a position that she has already taken may seem a trifle sophomoric and more than a little self-indulgent. But here Elizabeth Gilbert is, a re-married woman. It would be churlish not to wish her and "Felipe" every happiness.

Mrs. Gurdon is a regular contributor to the book pages of The Wall Street Journal.

time off

by William Westbrook

Andrew Ashton Photography (‘Hamlet’); Jim Thompson Art Center (zodiac); National Museum of Singapore (bag)

Top, Sydney: Sydney Festival 2010 includes a radical ‘Hamlet’; above, Bangkok: the Brahma Jati’s tiger page; right, Singapore: Nestlé’s Milo provides health and strength, the bag declares.

Bangkok

EXHIBITION

Golden Tiger/Hidden Monkey: Subtitled “Astrology-Art-Life,” this show pairs the art center’s own “Brahma Jati,” a set of traditional Thai paintings on paper that lays out the Siamese zodiac, with responses to the work by creative types in a number of fields. Fashion designers Roj Singhakul and Pattree Bhakdibutr offer up, respectively, 12 zodiac dresses and a number of scents appropriate to the five elements of humankind (these appear to be fire, metal, wood, water and earth). From artist Kamol Phaosavasdi there’s an object titled “Open the Sky,” and from animator Wisut Ponnimit there’s “Racing,” which explores the characters of the 12 zodiac animals.

Jim Thompson Art Center,
6 Soi Kasemsan 2, Rama 1 Rd.;
to Feb. 28, 9 a.m. to 5 p.m.
Free admission.
☎ 66-2-216-7368
Web: www.jimthompsonhouse.com

Hong Kong

THEATER

Bosquimanos Koryak: The puppeteers of this Uruguayan troupe—whose name combines the Spanish word for “bushmen” with the name of an indigenous Siberian people—work onstage with their large, fluorescent puppets. But dressed in black on a black stage, they achieve near-invisibility, to magical effect. They’ll perform “Olej’s Trick,” the story of a cleaner who dreams of being a circus magician.

Ngau Chi Wan Civic Centre Theater,
11 Clearwater Bay Rd., Kowloon; Jan. 15,
8 p.m.; Tsuen Wan Town Hall,
72 Tai Ho Rd., Tsuen Wan, New Territories;
Jan. 16, 8 p.m.; North District Town Hall,
2 Lung Wan St., Sheung Shui,
New Territories; Jan. 17, 8 p.m.
Admission: HK$140 and HK$180 (Ngau Chi Wan); HK$160 (Tsuen Wan); HK$120 and HK$160 (North District).
☎ 852-2111-5999
Web: www.urbtix.hk

Macau

EXHIBITION

Red Years—Photographs by Zheng Jingkang: Zheng Jingkang opened a portrait studio in Hong Kong in 1929, but the uneventful life was not for him. He left for the mainland in 1938, chronicled the Sino-Japanese War, was present at Tiananmen Square for the founding of the People’s Republic—the picture of Mao Zedong he took that day is the basis of the standard portrait enlargement—and became a leading figure in communist China’s first generation of photographers. This exhibition features 176 examples of his work.

Macao Museum, 112 Praceta do Museu de Macao; to March 21, Tuesday to Sunday,
10 a.m. to 6 p.m., closed Mondays.
Admission: 15 patacas.
☎ 853-2835-7911
Web: www.macaumuseum.gov.mo

Seoul

EXHIBITION

Andy Warhol, the Greatest: A couple of decades after his death, the American who helped persuade the world that tinted silk-screened photos and paintings of soup cans could be art is still one of the art world’s most reliable draws. The 110 works here include portraits of celebrities, abstract images and those old favorites “Campbell Soup Can” and “Coca-Cola.”

Seoul Museum of Art, 30 Misulgwan-gil
(Seosomun-dong 37), Jung-gu; to April 4,
10 a.m. to 9 p.m. weekdays, 10 a.m. to
7 p.m. weekends.
Admission: 12,000 won.
☎ 82-2-548-8690
Web: seoulmoa.seoul.go.kr

Singapore

EXHIBITION

The Bag: History as told through shopping bags (and an exercise in nostalgia for those of a certain age). With more than 60 original examples, accompanied by photographs to provide context, this exhibition traces the development of an affluent consumer culture in Singapore from the 1950s to the 1980s, as utilitarian carriers evolved into fashionable accessories. The kraft-paper bags of the early postwar years, with their distinctive red-and-white handles of cotton twine, spawned an industry and presented businesses with a new mobile advertising medium, but by the late 1970s paper was feeling the heat from plastic.

National Museum of Singapore,
93 Stamford Rd.; to April 18,
10 a.m. to 8 p.m.
Admission: S$10.
☎ 65-6332-3659
Web: www.nationalmuseum.sg

FESTIVAL

Singapore Fringe Festival: From the music, art, theater and dance on offer, organizers helpfully declare three highlights, in three categories: “____ Can Change,” a set of short plays that take on race, religion and sex; Our Own B612, a pair of former buskers from Taiwan; and “America the Gift Shop,” by Phillip Toledano, an installation that asks, If American foreign policy had a gift shop, what would it sell?

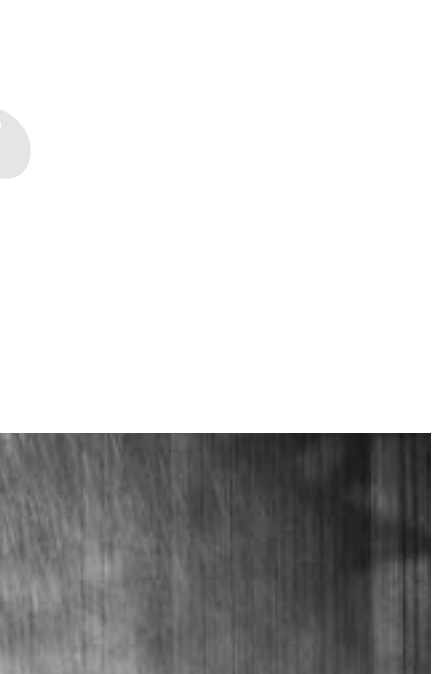
Several venues; Jan. 13 to 24, various times.
Admission: S$19 to S$27
(some events free).
☎ 65-6348-5555
Web: www.singaporefringe.com
(information); www.sistic.com (tickets)

Sydney

FESTIVAL

Sydney Festival: The official Festival First Night is Jan. 9, with more than 500 performers showing their stuff for free from 2 p.m. to 11 p.m., but the first events will actually come in ahead of that, including German director Thomas Ostermeier’s radical take on “Hamlet,” starting Jan. 8. The range of choices is hard to overstate. Just poking around in the music category—the others include theater, dance and visual arts—you’ll find selections from Schubert to Stravinsky (a double bill of “Oedipus Rex” and “Symphony of Psalms,” as staged by American director Peter Sellars) to Al Green to the country rock and power pop of Neko Case to Toumani Diabaté at the kora (a West African harp).

Numerous venues; Jan. 9 to 30,
various times.
Admission: A$16.50 to A$189
(some events free).
☎ 61-132-849
Web: www.sydneyfestival.org.au



Tour: Asia

CONCERT

The Killers: Out of Las Vegas but sounding nothing like Wayne Newton, this quartet—Brandon Flowers (vocals, keyboards), Dave Keuning (guitar), Mark Stoermer (bass) and Ronnie Vannucci (drums)—got together in 2002 and within two years had hit the big time with its first album. “Hot Fuss,” with echoes of 1980s New Wave, picked up five Grammy nominations and sold more than seven million copies. The Killers will finish the Asia leg of this world tour with a concert in Seoul (Feb. 6), then continue on to Australia; stops there will include Sydney on Feb. 13, Perth on Feb. 14 and Melbourne on Feb. 21.

Singapore: Singapore Indoor Stadium,
2 Stadium Walk; Jan. 24, 8 p.m.
Admission: S$88 to S$168.
☎ 65-6348-5555
Web: www.sistic.com

Beijing: Workers Gymnasium, Gongti North Road, Chaoyang District; Jan. 26, 8 p.m.
Admission: 380 yuan to 1,280 yuan.
☎ 86-10-6417-7845
Web: www.piao.com.cn

Hong Kong: AsiaWorld-Arena, AsiaWorld-Expo, Hong Kong International Airport, Lantau; Jan. 29, 8 p.m.
Admission: HK$400 to HK$750.
☎ 852-3128-8288
Web: www.hkticketing.com

Manila: SM Concert Grounds, Mall of Asia, Pasay City; Jan. 31, 8 p.m.
Admission: 550 pesos to 3,950 pesos.
☎ 63-2-911-5555
Web: www.ticketnet.com.ph

Tokyo: Zepp Tokyo, Palette Town, Aomi 1-chome, Koto-ku; Feb. 4, 7 p.m.
Admission: 8,500 yen.
☎ 81-3-3462-6969
Web: www.creativeman.co.jp

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